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# JOHN DRINKWATER

BY ST. JOHN ERVINE

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THE most singular feature of the London theatrical season of 1918-1919 was the success of Mr. John Drinkwater's play, *Abraham Lincoln*. The singularity of that success will be apparent even to those who are totally ignorant of the theatre when I state that the play does not contain one of the elements which are generally judged to be essential to "popular" success. Mr. Arnold Bennett, in the preface which he has written for the American edition of the play, says "we have contrived to make all London come to Hammersmith to see a play without a love interest or a bedroom scene," but Mr. Bennett does not exhaust the list of the "popular" aids without which *Abraham Lincoln* achieved its great success. The play has neither the interest of love or adultery, nor has it any comic interest; it makes no appeal to passion, nor does it offer exhibitions, plain or coloured, of pretty young women in varying degrees of clothing. It is divided into six short scenes spread over a period of five years, covering the time between 1860, when Lincoln was invited to accept nomination for the Presidency, and 1865 when he was assassinated by Booth; and so, although there is a very definite unity in the play, there is also a certain amount of dispersal of interest. It is a piece of static drama, which is generally less interesting than dynamic drama; and, so far as the British playgoer is concerned, it is about a foreigner of whom little more than his name is known. Foreign politics do not much interest the ordinary man, and they seem to interest the British ordinary man rather less than they do the ordinary man of other countries; but in spite of that fact, Mr. Drinkwater, inevitably, of course, has introduced much reference to the domestic politics of the United States into his play. He also uses the device of

a chorus between his scenes to comment on events that have already occurred, and to refer to events that are about to take place.

All of these characteristics of the play are such as may immediately be set down, in the judgment of the commercial manager, as "unpopular" things. To these must be added further aids to unpopularity in connection with the production of it.

*Abraham Lincoln* was performed in London at an obscure and ugly theatre in a distant suburb by an unknown management with a cast which did not contain the name of a single player of reputation. There was not an actor or actress in the cast with sufficient popularity to draw sixpence into the theatre. The scenic effects were so slight as to be negligible. There was no orchestra. No economy was spared in the production, as a witty manager said of his own cheaply-mounted entertainment. If Mr. Arnold Bennett and Mr. Nigel Playfair, who are jointly responsible for the Lyric Opera House at Hammersmith, had purposely set out to see how best they could repel audiences, it would have seemed to the commercial manager that they could not more effectively have done so than with the methods they employed for the production of *Abraham Lincoln*.

And yet the play was an enormous success. Mr. Bennett has written in a picturesque way, but strictly without exaggeration, that "Nobody can dine out in London today, and admit without a blush that he has not seen *Abraham Lincoln*. Monarchs and princes have seen it. Archbishops have seen it. Statesmen without number have seen it. An ex-Lord Chancellor told me that he had journeyed out into the wilds of Hammersmith, and was informed at the theatre that there were no seats left. He could not believe that he would have to return from the wilds unsatisfied. But so it fell out." The play survived two spells of unusually hot weather, and seems likely to maintain its hold on favour for the best part of the 1919-20 season. When I saw the play, the theatre was almost full, although the weather was extremely hot and the time was the afternoon of Wednesday, a time when one does not expect to see a large audience at any theatre, but particularly at a suburban one. And while this unusual play was drawing large audi-

ences through a heat wave, managers of West End theatres, at which expensive and "popular" entertainments were being offered, were wringing their hands and regarding the Bankruptcy Court with frightened eyes!

What are the merits of the play? Why has it taken so strong a hold on the minds and hearts of the English people? Why do fashionable people jostle working people in their endeavours to see it? Why did King George and Queen Mary travel to Hammersmith to a performance of it? Why have men like Mr. H. G. Wells gone twice to see it played, and come away, more moved by it on the second occasion even than on the first? I cannot answer for other people, but I can answer for myself, and I think that the answer I give to my own question when I ask myself why I am moved by this play, will in great measure explain why the bulk of people are moved by it.

The sincerity with which the play is written is clear and unmistakable, but sincerity in itself would hardly commend the play so successfully to the popular mind. It is obvious to me that there is something present in this piece which causes it to correspond very closely and intimately with a deeply-felt emotion in the hearts of those who see it performed. Any sincere figure sincerely represented on the stage will evoke an immediate response of noble emotion from an audience, and it would have been difficult not to make an impressive and appealing character in a play out of a man so like the Knight in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as Abraham Lincoln was:

. . . a worthy man,  
That fro the time that he first bigan  
To ryden out, he loved chivalrye,  
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisye.

But Mr. Drinkwater seems to me to have done rather more than render the natural impressiveness of this honourable man in a faithful fashion on the stage. He has taken a national character and made him into a figure of universal appeal. It must be obvious to any student of human affairs that it is the man who is most nearly national in character who makes the most universal call upon the heart: the man of cosmopolitan character fails generally to make any appeal at all, and never succeeds in anything greater

than an appeal to sect. There is a type of person who knows no more of Dr. Johnson's writings than this, that he once described patriotism as the last refuge of a scoundrel; and this type of person, generally a Socialist of small intelligence, blandly assumes that Dr. Johnson wished the readers of his Dictionary to believe that patriotism itself is a scoundrelly quality. Dr. Johnson meant no more than he said, namely, that a virtue may sometimes be exploited by evil men for vicious purposes. When I say that hypocrisy is the tribute which vice pays to virtue, I do not mean that virtue is to be shunned; and when Dr. Johnson says that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel he does not wish his readers to give up loving their country on that account. He would probably urge them to love their country all the more because bad men chose to make profit out of it. The good European becomes a good European by being a good German or a good Frenchman or a good Englishman, not by forgetting to be German or French or English; and Abraham Lincoln became a great citizen of the world because he was a great citizen of America. His life, when it is made known to them, appeals to men of other nations because he was essentially an American with an unquenchable love of his country. "Many waters cannot quench love," Solomon sang, "neither can the floods drown it," and it was the imperishable steadfastness of Lincoln's spirit, his valour in adversity, his implacable resolve that the right thing should prevail over the wrong thing, that set him in authority over his fellows and put him among the immortals. And such a man must instantly cause the whole world to yield its praise to him and accept his authority.

When I say that Mr. Drinkwater has taken a national character and made him into a figure of universal appeal, I do not mean that Mr. Drinkwater has given Lincoln a quality which he did not possess. I mean that he has put him into his play in such a way that his purely local character does not disturb the universal appeal which he makes; and he has done this with extraordinary skill, but without obtrusion, by drawing very closely the parallel between the American Civil War and the European War. *Abraham Lincoln* is a topical play in the sense in which anything of universal interest is topical. All great and universal things

are capable of being applied to local and transitory affairs with such force that they seem to short-sighted persons to have been devised exclusively for that special crisis. *The Trojan Women* of Euripides is as topical at this moment as it was when it was written, and it will never cease to be topical so long as there are human beings to suffer and endure and love and hate and fall and rise. In that sense *Abraham Lincoln* is topical. It is about a comparatively small war which began in 1861 and lasted for four years; but I am perfectly certain that the overwhelming mass of those who saw it performed in London saw Lincoln not as the protagonist of a united America or the ruler of a foreign country tortured by internecine war, but as the protagonist of their own cause during the past five years, and the expression of aims and desires which, while inarticulate in their mouths, were nevertheless deeply-held in their hearts. And women, not learned in argument or familiar with policies, went to see the play because, in some dim manner, they felt that it made clear to them the faith for which their sons and lovers died.

It's a poor thing, spinning tales,  
When there's no faith in them,

says the old woman in Mr. Drinkwater's little play, *The Storm*," and he could not have drawn the tears of many men and women by his play if he had not seen Abraham Lincoln as more than an interesting character, with all the details of his life correctly set forth. I have, indeed, heard some complainants say that Mr. Drinkwater has not kept rigidly to fact in his play, or that he has made too much of a single episode in Lincoln's life. It does not appear to me to matter whether the facts are correctly tabulated or not, nor does it matter whether Mr. Drinkwater has set out the whole of Lincoln's life or only a piece of it. What does matter is that he gives to his audiences an impression of a full and complete existence expressed at the height of its powers. It is very likely that had he tried to put more of the President's career into his play he would have given a smaller account of him. I remember once, standing on the coast of Wales and looking towards Ireland during a thick sea-fog. It had a sense of immensity and distance that I lost when the fog disappeared and I could see clearly

for many miles. We do not need accurate sight so much as we need imagination; and the strongest glasses are of less service to us than a shut eye and an active and understanding mind. It is very natural that a bereaved and tortured world should turn gratefully to the memory of so simple and honest a man as Abraham Lincoln, who completely upset all preconceived notions of a politician by believing in his own faith. The insincerities of kings and politicians have brought the world to a misery of broken faith and murdered boys; and the multitude of men and women, innocent of this crime, but deeply wronged by it, find in the thought of such a man as Lincoln comfort for their sorrow and support for their belief that the world will yet be delivered from the body of this death. They see in "old Abe" an act of faith, a final and irrefutable assertion that man is of divine, not bestial, origin.

## II

John Drinkwater was born at Leytonstone, in Essex, on June 1, 1882, his father being Mr. A. E. Drinkwater, a man of theatrical affairs engaged in management for Miss Lillah McCarthy at the Kingsway Theatre in London. He was educated at Oxford High School and after twelve years spent in the service of various insurance companies, became manager of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre which had been founded through the munificence of Mr. Barry Jackson, a wealthy inhabitant of that city. The Birmingham Repertory Theatre is, I believe, the most beautiful theatre in England, and it has set a very high standard in plays for its audiences. It is the only repertory theatre in England which has survived the war, and its directors are very proud of the fact that they have not lowered their standard for a moment at a time when theatrical managers elsewhere were tumbling over themselves in their eagerness to get into the gutter. In less than ten years, fifteen of the plays of Shakespeare have been produced at this theatre, apart from revivals of plays by others of the ancient writers and productions of new plays by moderns. Drinkwater, himself a poet and dramatist, with a good record of work behind him—for he had written many poems and prose pieces, including a book on Swinburne and one on William

Morris, and had edited the collected plays of St. John Hankin and the poems of Philip Sidney—governed the theatre, wrote plays for it and produced the plays of other men. The intention of the theatre was thus expressed by him in *Lines for the Opening of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre*:

To you good ease, and grace to love us well:  
 To us good ease, and grace some tale to tell  
 Worthy your love. We stand with one consent  
 To plead anew a holy argument—  
 For art is holy. We, to whom there falls  
 The charge that men may see within these walls  
 The comely chronicle of comely plays,  
 You, who shall quicken us with blame or praise,  
 Desire alike but this, that here shall spring  
 Such issue of our labour as shall bring  
 Fresh laurels to the altars that have known  
 Service of men whose passion might atone  
 For worlds than this more faithless, men whose names  
 Are very life—aye, swift and urgent flames  
 Of living are they. These are over us  
 To lighten all our travel: Aeschylus,  
 Euripides, the Sophoclean song,  
 And Aristophanes who captured wrong  
 In nets of laughter, lords of the Attic stage,  
 The fourfold Greek dominion; and the age  
 Of nameless poets when the hope began  
 To quicken from the blood of *Everyman*  
 Into the splendour of Marlowe's kingly lust  
 Of kingly life, the glory that thieves nor rust  
 Can ever spoil, whose name is manifold—  
 Ford, Massinger, Dekker, Webster aureoled  
 With light of hell made holy, Middleton,  
 Chapman, Beaumont and Fletcher, aye, and one  
 Whom even these the lords of beauty's passion  
 Might crown for beauty's high imperial fashion  
 In classic calm of intellectual rule,  
 Ben Jonson. Sirs, I am nor wit nor fool  
 To speak in praise of him whose name is praise,  
 Whose word is on the forehead of the days,  
 Shakespeare, our master tried and proved how well.  
 Mortality's immortal chronicle.

Under the warrant of these we sail,  
 And theirs whose later labour these might hail,  
 Congreve and Otway: the Good-Natured Man.  
 Proud, tattered Oliver: Dick Sheridan,  
 Who played at passion, but free-born of wit  
 Put scandal out to school and laughed at it;



These few that stand between the golden age  
 When poets made a marvel of the stage  
 And—do we dare to dream it?—an age that stirred  
 But yesterday, whereof the dawning word—  
 Spoken when Ibsen spake, and here reset  
 To many tunes on lips untutored yet  
 For speech Olympian, albeit pure of will,—  
 Shall ripen into witness that we still  
 Are countrymen of those glad poets dead;  
 The seed is sown, the barren days are sped.  
 And they who sowed, are sowing? He beguiled  
 By who shall say what envious madness, Wilde,  
 Misfortune's moth and laughter's new wing-feather,  
 Remembering now no black, spiteful weather:  
 Hankin and he, the cleanser of our day,  
 Whose art is both a Preface and a Play,  
 And he who pities, as poets have pitied, life  
 Of *Justice* reft, so driven and torn in *Strife*,  
 And one who cries in *Waste* some news of man,  
 And one who finds in the bruised hearts of *Nan*  
 And *Pompey* tragic and old yet timeless things:  
 And that dead *Playboy*, and his peer who sings  
 Yet of Cuchulain by the western sea—  
 Of these is sown the seed that yet shall be  
 A heavy-waggoned harvest, masters mine,  
 Gathered by men whom now the immoderate wine  
 Of song is making ready.

In these walls,

Look not for that light trickery that falls  
 To death at birth, wrought piecemeal at the will  
 Of apes who seek to ply their mimic skill:  
 Here shall the player work as work he may,  
 Yet shall he work in service of the play.  
 Nor shall you here find pitiful release  
 From life's large pressure, nay, but new increase  
 Of life made urgent by these master-men  
 Who are our captains. Life, and life again—  
 Tragic or brave, free-witted, gentle, signed  
 Of beauty's passion or the adventurous mind,  
 Or light as orchard blossom, motley wear,  
 But life's wear always—that shall be our care  
 And all shall surely follow. What may be  
 Hereafter—to the heavens to us to see  
 No will transgressing on the poet's wish.  
 To you, to judge the meat before the fish.  
 May you that watch and we that serve so grow  
 In wisdom as adventuring we go  
 That some unwavering light from us may shine.  
 We have the challenge of the mighty line—  
 God grant us grace to give the countersign

I have quoted those lines at length because they not only illuminate Drinkwater's mind and purpose, but because they constitute a programme which one would wish to see nailed to the front door of every theatre in the English-speaking world. I cannot imagine a more worthy motto for a theatre than this:

To you good ease, and grace to love us well:  
To us good ease, and grace some tale to tell  
Worthy your love.

with the final prayer:

We have the challenge of the mighty line—  
God grant us grace to give the countersign.

### III

In all John Drinkwater's work, I discover high sincerity, a love of simple beauty and good purpose and fine character, and a deep regard for the dignity of his craft and the repute of those who have contributed well to the world's accumulated stock of beauty. "The dead cannot pay for praise," said Dr. Johnson, but it is freely rendered to them by those who, hearing "the challenge of the mighty line," know how to give the countersign. Drinkwater has, I imagine, very little sympathy with the riotous writers who burst upon Europe in the years immediately preceding the war, and let

their lean and flashy songs  
Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw.

About the time that Signor Marinetti first appeared in London, there was an exhibition of Cubist pictures in one of our galleries. The artists declared their intention to be only to paint the significant parts of a scene or a person, and one of them exhibited a picture of the interior of a cafe in which the only significant feature of one of the habitués was his shirt-front! I suggested at the time that the artist's metaphysics might be admirable, but that his art was preposterous; for when a significant thing is dissociated from the things which make it significant, it ceases to have any significance whatever. By taking away the man and leaving only the shirt-front, the artist had made his intention nugatory, for we saw only an irrelevant shirt-front where

we ought to have seen a significant one. This clever-cleverness can not last for long. It may puzzle people for a season, but it will never impress them, and the attractions of a puzzle are soon exhausted. The great simplicities may offer little scope for ingenious conversation at dinner-parties, but they nourish the soul for ever. You will not find in anything that John Drinkwater has written a desire to show off or to attract applause by monkey tricks. He invites you to witness the miracle of familiar things recurring. "Come, sweetheart," he sings:

Come, sweetheart, listen, for I have a thing  
Most wonderful to tell you—news of spring.

Albeit winter still is in the air,  
And the earth troubled, and the branches bare,

Yet down the fields to-day I saw her pass—  
The spring—her feet went shining through the grass.

She touched the ragged hedgerows—I have seen  
Her finger-prints, most delicately green;

And she has whispered to the crocus leaves,  
And to the garrulous sparrows in the eaves.

Swiftly she passed and shyly, and her fair  
Young face was hidden in her cloudy hair.

She would not stay, her season is not yet,  
But she has reawakened, and has set

The sap of all the world astir, and rent  
Once more the shadows of our discontent.

Triumphant news—a miracle I sing—  
This everlasting miracle of spring.

What subject is more worn than that of spring, but how freshly and with what pleasure John Drinkwater sings of it. His poems are full of such simplicities . . . the everlasting beauties and delights . . . and words like "black-birds," "thrushes," "apples," "daffodils" and "water-lilies" are the common coins of his treasury.

I love my land. No heart can know  
The patriot's mystery, until  
It aches as mine for woods ablow  
In Gloucestershire with daffodil  
Or Bicester brakes that violets fill.

These are what England is to me,  
 Not empire, nor the name of her  
 Ranging from pole to tropic sea.  
 These are the soil in which I bear  
 All that I have of character.

That men my fellows near and far  
 May live in like communion,  
 Is all I pray; all pastures are  
 The best beloved beneath the sun;  
 I have my own; I envy none.

and the joy with which he finds a similar delight in simple pleasures in other men breaks out in this happy poem, called *Anthony Crundle*, taken from the volume entitled *Olton Pools*:

*Here lies the body of*  
*ANTHONY CRUNDLE*  
*Farmer, of this Parish*  
*Who died in 1849 at the age of 82.*  
*"He delighted in music."*  
*R. I. P.*

*And of*  
*SUSAN*  
*For fifty-three years his wife,*  
*Who died in 1860, aged 86.*

Anthony Crundle of Dorrington Wood  
 Played on a piccolo. Lord was he,  
 For seventy years, of sheaves that stood  
 Under the perry and cider tree;  
*Anthony Crundle, R. I. P.*

And because he prospered with sickle and scythe,  
 With cattle afield and labouring ewe,  
 Anthony was uncommonly blithe,  
 And played of a night to himself and Sue;  
*Anthony Crundle, eighty-two.*

The earth to till, and a tune to play,  
 And Susan for fifty years and three,  
 And Dorrington Wood at the end of day. . . .  
 May Providence do no worse by me;  
*Anthony Crundle, R. I. P.*

#### IV

Like all young men of quality, he shows the influence which his great elders have had on him. These signs are more easily perceived in his plays than in his poems. The

influence of Mr. Thomas Hardy, for example, is plainly to be observed in *Abraham Lincoln*. I do not say that *Abraham Lincoln* would not have been written if Mr. Hardy had not produced *The Dynasts*, but I do say that it would probably not have been written just in the way that it was written. The influence of Synge's *Riders to the Sea* is strongly impressed on Drinkwater's powerful little play, *The Storm*, which is the first of the three plays contained in the volume, *Pawns*. A young writer naturally draws sustenance from the work of men whom he admires, and it is right and proper that he should do so, and the measure of his quality is the degree to which he accepts the guidance of great men without abandoning his mind to them. John Drinkwater was influenced by Synge and is still influenced by Mr. Hardy, but he was not overpowered by Synge nor is he overpowered by Mr. Hardy. There is something of these writers in the plays I have named, but there is more of John Drinkwater, and as he grows in stature of mind, his own force will take up all the space in which he works. The truth of this statement is to be found on comparing the influence of Synge on *The Storm* with the influence of Mr. Hardy on *Abraham Lincoln*. The outside influence in the short play is far stronger and more palpable than in the long one, and since the short one was written three or four years before the long one, it is obvious that outside influences are declining while the native power is growing in vigour. I am told that Drinkwater is writing a play on Oliver Cromwell, a character over whom he has brooded for many years. I prophesy that in this poem there will be nothing but the pure and aboriginal Drinkwater.

## V

If I were asked to give an account of his philosophy of life, I would bid my questioner read the poem called *Character* in his latest book of verse, *Loyalties*, and would remind him that it is one of the very few poems of his in which a note of anger is struck:

If one should tell you that in such a spring  
The hawthorn boughs into the blackbird's nest  
Poured poison, or that once at harvesting

The ears were stony, from so manifest  
Slander of proven faith in tree and corn,  
You would turn unheeding, knowing him forsworn.

Yet now, when one whose life has never known  
Corruption, as you know: whose days have been  
As daily tidings in your heart of lone  
And gentle courage, suffers the word unclean  
Of envious tongues, doubting you dare not cry---  
"I have been this man's familiar, and you lie."

And when he had marked that sign of staunch friendships,  
I would bid him read this charming poem:

Old Oliver, my uncle, went  
With but a penny for his needs,  
Walking from Cotsall Hill to Clent,  
His pocket full of poppy seeds.  
And every little lane along  
He scattered them for good man's will,  
And then he sang a happy song  
From Clent again to Cotsall Hill.

I should then tell him that, having read those two poems,  
he ought to possess as much knowledge of John Drink-  
water's character as it is necessary for any man to possess  
of another.

ST. JOHN ERVINE.